

H O M E G R O W N



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Volunteers from Publix spread mulch over the community garden at Golden Gate Community Center on Tuesday. Publix volunteers worked together with representatives from the Blue Zones Project and Collier County Parks and Recreation Department to rejuvenate the center's garden.

Volunteers spruce up garden, plant vegetables for community's use

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In October, the sweet potatoes should be ready for harvest and the community garden plots will be ready for planting winter crops.

A garden behind Golden Gate Community Center was the focus of efforts from about 40 Publix employees volunteering their time on Tuesday morning, working with a crew from Collier County's Parks and Recreation Department with support from the Blue Zones Project. They took apart the old garden beds which were falling apart, weeded the plots, added fresh topsoil, mulch and weeding mat, and planted the first vegetables of what should grow to be an oasis of healthy eating.

"This is an amazing thing they are doing," said Carrie Drew, regional manager for the Collier County Parks. "We had a community garden years ago, but it was years since it had been worked on. It looked like a graveyard." The Golden Gate facility is the only community garden in the county, she added.

The volunteers established 22 individual garden beds that will be available for residents to rent and grow their own vegetables. There are 20 regular beds, each measuring 4 feet by 12 feet, and two that are raised and surrounded by pavers, to be handicapped-accessible. In addition, an herb garden will grow rosemary, basil, cilantro, oregano, thyme and other herbs as part of the county's summer camp pro-

gram at the Community Center.

The volunteers from Publix pitched in enthusiastically, swarming over the loads of mulch delivered by parks and rec equipment with shovels, rakes and wheelbarrows, and spreading it over the matting they had laid out. Anyone standing still near the work crew ran the risk of being covered up in mulch.

The volunteers made short work of what had been anticipated as an all-day project, and allowing them to finish up before the day became too hot. The crew at the Community Center was one part of the effort, said Publix District Manager Scott Kiesel, with an even larger group working at Child's Path of Collier County.

"We love working with the community," said Kiesel, unconcerned that vegetables grown in the garden plots might cut into sales in his stores' produce departments. The work in Naples was part of the annual Publix Serves day, he said, in which more than 5,500 Publix associates in six states were donating their time on community projects. The company also made a donation to cover the cost of materials used for the Community Garden, including the planks to define the beds and a sealer to protect the gazebo on the site.

In addition to illustrating the concept that many hands make light work, the garden plots exemplify the precepts of the Blue Zones, said Jessica Crane, community policy lead for the Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida.

"This project is a great fit. In all the Blue Zones regions, it's always about gardening," said Crane. One of the



Brittany Blocker prepares to plant a sweet potato.

cornerstones of the Blue Zones philosophy is the "Power 9," a group of behaviors shared by populations around the world identified as living the longest, healthiest lives. One of these, called the "plant slant," urges everyone to eat a more plant-rich diet, noting that people who live the longest, healthiest lives around the world tend to eat only small amounts of meat and more fresh fruits and vegetables, packed with disease-fighting nutrients and antioxidants.

Brought to Southwest Florida

through sponsorship by the NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with the national Healthways and Blue Zones organizations, Blue Zones Project is a community-wide well-being improvement initiative designed to make healthy choices easier through permanent changes to environment, policy and social networks. From individuals to schools, worksites, restaurants, faith-based groups and up to entire communities, Blue Zones emphasizes evidence-based methods to help people live longer, better lives.

Blue Zones provided snacks and drinks for the volunteers, and sweet potato plants which will serve as a "cover crop," keep weeds down and give residents who rent a plot for \$50 annually an immediate payoff from their garden.

Posted on the gate in the fence surrounding the garden, the Community Garden Rules start off with the most obvious - "Do not pick or harvest other plot members' vegetables, fruit or flowers." But do, they say, "feel free to pick a weed or two." Whoever wrote the rules had a sense of humor; they go on to advise, "Do not kiss the frogs or toads in the garden - they will not become a prince," adding, "and whatever you do, don't ever, ever feed your Mogwai after midnight."

For more information on the garden, or to sign up for a plot, go online to www.CollierCommunityGarden.org. For more information about Blue Zones Project, contact the local Blue Zones team at 239-624-2312 or visit www.bluezonesproject.com.